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ABSTRACT

The college admissions process has grown increasingly burdensome, expensive, and morally corrosive and ill serves the college-bound student. The idiosyncratic college application form is a product of the isolated planning of the college admissions profession. Each student has to complete a different application form for each college to which he or she applies, unlike the financial aid form which is standardized for all colleges. A standardized application form could be developed in this four-step process: (1) agree that the present multiple application system has faults; (2) delegate the most thoughtful practitioners to work on the problem; (3) define criteria for developing the kind of service that is apt to meet the needs of most students and universities; and (4) authorize an agency to develop and test a system which would meet the specifications laid down by members of the admissions profession chosen to represent the interests of different kinds of universities and the students themselves. This central application system could gather basic identification information, teacher references, and any supplemental data that selective or specialized programs might require. The greatest effect of this system would be to put initiative for the college selection process back into the hands of the students themselves, making the work of the school counselor more crucial. There would be nothing mandatory about joining the central application system; colleges would join because they believed they could be served. The participation of highly selective colleges would be an enabling factor for the system and the admissions renaissance would become a reality. (ABL)

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COLLEGE APPLICATION MADE PLEASANT

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ABSTRACT OF "COLLEGE APPLICATION MADE PLEASANT"

The argument is that the competitive multiple application system grows increasingly cumbersome, expensive, morally corrosive and ill-serves the college bound student. A central application system could standardize the forms which could be tailored to provide the necessary data different kinds of institutions required. If colleges can use a uniform method of collecting family financial aid information why cannot they devise a uniform method of collecting the information they require for making admission's decisions? Admissions information requirements are not more complex than those of financial aid.

College counseling now involves a review of options for a student which to a large extent are hypothetical and speculative. Speculative, too are admissions decisions made regarding members of ~~an~~ applicant pools whose degree of interest can only be guessed. A central admissions office could provide applicants and colleges with timely and relevant information about possibilities, likelihoods, and admissions reality.

The author describes the competitive history which has led to present anarchistic admissions practices and reviews the successes of various cooperative practices. He describes a 5 step process to devise a workable central application scheme and shows how the system would produce vital information for counselors and admissions officers at every stage of the application calendar to improve the efficiency of the process.

Dan Fuston

COLLEGE APPLICATION MADE PLEASANT

by Dan Tyson

A wall hanging in the tradition of the sampler catches my eye in the office of an English teacher I know. It is a copy of an 18th century school reward of merit designed by E. Bacon of Philadelphia. The original is in the Smithsonian Collection. The legend reads

JUVENILE STUDY MADE PLEASANT

and it depicts the letters of the alphabet in block type. Its reproduction in black on a red handkerchief has been quilted in traditional sampler style by this modern school mistress. It reminds one of a time when schools were small and the educational enterprise a more pleasant prospect for pedagogues and pedants. That happier image is worth recovering as we think about how to reduce the complexities of the contemporary application processes into a scheme at once simpler and more pleasant.

The admissions profession has developed its contemporary modi operandi in two ways. The first way is the result of autonomous decisions made by practical admissions officers who annually refine their own practices to meet their particular institutional goals. The idiosyncratic application form is a product of such isolated planning.

There is a tendency for selective universities to imitate one another - the universities enjoying the highest status having the most mimics. But the imitators also need product differentiation. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that selective universities make their admissions decisions on the same limited set of discriminators (brains, personality, money, talent), they attempt to elicit information about these factors by using idiosyncratic application forms. At its best the well-planned idiosyncratic application form collects distinctive kinds of information in distinctive ways so as to complement and reinforce the distinctive nature of the universities whose truly selective natures require finer nuances of differentiation. Most imitators, however, need not be so fussy in the face of the fact that they may be admitting double the numbers they need and holding a wait list at least as long as the number of openings in the class.

Nevertheless, one student now has to complete a different application form for each college to which he or she applies. He or she also has to ask two teachers and a school counselor to complete one or two idiosyncratic forms for each application made. It is common for students to apply to five colleges and not uncommon for them to apply to ten or more. This system (perhaps non-system is a more accurate designation) demands that school counselors and school teachers carefully complete an

inordinate number of idiosyncratic forms. Each teacher who is recommending Suzy Smith should be describing the Suzy they know as she functions in Central High whether the idiosyncratic form is destined for Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, Stanford, or Williams. The counselors or the teachers have some expertise about their own educational environments and some specific knowledge of Suzy. A well designed form should tap that knowledge rather than invite the school personnel to venture differential guesses about what Suzy might do at college X,Y,or Z. Those sort of judgments are best left to the college admissions officer, who, presumably, is the expert on what kinds of students are most apt to thrive at his or her institution.

The foregoing paragraphs suggest the question. Could college application forms be standardized so that the high school students and their counselors and teachers would only need to describe the applicant once no matter how many applications the student decided to send? A few of us might be ready at this point to say "yes" to this question, but many more seem not to have thought enough about it to venture an informed opinion.

The second way in which admissions practice has evolved is from cooperative planning. The role of the national testing programs in admissions, for example, could not have emerged without the cooperation of many universities and colleges who agreed to

abandon local testing arrangements and utilize the services of a centralized testing system. Another example, less widely used, is the agreement of the Common Application group of colleges to accept a standardized form which the student and the school can complete and then reproduce and send.

Perhaps the most ambitious and successful of the cooperative endeavors are the services which serve the financial aid officers by introducing standard procedures for the collection of family financial information. These data collecting, analyzing and reporting systems regularly handle information which is no less complex than the information required for making admissions decisions. Is it not reasonable to ask universities to use a common application form as they do a common financial aid application form?

Over the past two years I have lobbied the officers of NACAC to appoint a commission to study the feasibility of working toward this kind of efficiency. I have lobbied officers of The College Board. I have written to ACT officers. This year I even extended my lobbying efforts to all of the secondary school officers in all of the state and regional ACACs. No one presently empowered in any of these organizations except Rusty Haynes, president of Rocky Mountain ACAC and Jim Ballengee, Jr. of Western ACAC has given me very enthusiastic encouragement. But

on the other hand, none who has had the professional courtesy to reply has made a persuasive case for not doing it. One respondent invoked the fear of amassing any more data in banks lest big brother loom larger in our lives than he now does. The more common explanation for why we don't develop a more rational system is that a central application service would erode institutional autonomy. The mere evocation of a threat to that noble-sounding abstraction seems enough to block any further thought.

One of the difficulties of enlisting support for a central application service is that members of our profession expect to study specific operational details so that they might assess the impact on their present procedures. Thus far, I have not gone beyond citing some of the successful centralized application systems such as UCCA in the United Kingdom, CAO in Ireland, the California University system. I have assumed that a national U.S. application system serving the diversity of institutions and the numbers of applicants would take different forms than those models which serve particular segments of the aggregate candidate mass and which serve much smaller and much more homogeneous constituencies. A central application service for the United States is, indeed, an idea of awesome complexity. The problem is, however, a finite one. Admissions procedures can be defined logically. More rational schemes than the present competitive

multiple application procedure with its serious deficiencies are conceivable and it is no crime to try to think about them. All of us wish to retain the art in our profession, but no one seriously can maintain that the present multiple application system is the best possible structure by which our profession might serve students on their way from school to college. What is to be done?

The first step is to agree that the present multiple application system is becoming more and more unwieldy, expensive, wasteful of professional resources, and morally corrosive . The second step is to delegate our most thoughtful practitioners to work on the problem. The third step is to define criteria for developing the kind of service that is apt to meet the needs of most students and most universities. The fourth step is to authorize an agency to develop and test a system which would meet the specifications laid down by members of the admissions profession chosen to represent the interests of different kinds of universities and the students themselves i.e., school counselors.

I am sure that many admissions professionals have ideas that would contribute to the effectiveness of a central application system. These ideas need to be drawn out, examined and incorporated as they are found useful. The existing models need to be examined carefully to see how and why they work. We are capable

of creating by this effort a service that would work effectively for us. The technology exists. All that is lacking is the professional will, the imagination, the money, the political consensus. These can be developed.

The Journal of College Admissions printed an article in the summer of 1987 "The Counselor as Reformer" in which I posited the idea of counselors making wholesale use of the Common Application Form as a signal to colleges that there is gathering opposition to continuing the proliferating idiocy of idiosyncratic application forms. That idea was only partly serious and was meant to initiate some discussion about ways to meet chronic admissions problems. The Common Application system, however, can be, and often is, used in ways that actually exacerbate the multiple application problem. I have a better idea.

Why not acknowledge that there are three - perhaps more - levels of information involved in an application procedure. The basic level is what might be called "boilerplate": identification, name, school, address, social security number, parents, telephone number, interests, talents, accomplishments, etc. - the kind of student information that both ACT and ATP gather from students that pass through their testing and data gathering procedures. Schools' data processing departments could be equipped with a software package to produce this boilerplate application format from its own records.

Then there is the academic and activity record. Again, schools could produce this at command from their records departments. This combined with the boilerplate and verified by a counselor is all that would be necessary in the way of application to most public university and community college systems.

Many selective colleges need teacher references. These forms could be standardized along the lines of the Common Application form.

I think most admissions professionals agree that most essential application information could be collected on a set of standard formats. Not every university or college would need teacher recommendations. The standard application form could be tailored when transmitted to a certain college to provide only the information that college needed for its selection and records purposes.

Finally there may be idiosyncratic material that would represent a third layer of information that some very highly selective universities or specialized programs might require. Such supplemental data collection could be handled in a parallel channel of interaction simply as direct correspondence. In this category would be essays on particular topics, copies of marked papers or examinations or examples of art, tapes, videos, photographs, etc.

The above standardizations are not revolutionary and one could imagine that consensus around them might be achieved so long as the reform was limited to just the form itself and not to the ways it was transmitted and responded to.

If students and institutions are to ever be well served with a modern admissions system, however, the change must be more radical and we must give up some of the myths and dogmas that present conventions honor.

The first myth is the treasured one of admissions officers who want to believe that every applicant is a first choice candidate. We know better. Why not get that out on the table right from the first. I see nothing wrong with a system that asks a students to rank order his choices for everyone to see and to have the single application form (1)sent not to individual colleges but to a central application office there to be copied and sent to all the colleges ranked. Each college could then invoke all of its standard cultivation ploys. But the college would have the added advantage of being able to calibrate the intensity of its cultivation to the quality of the student and the apparent level of his interest. The qualified first choice candidate could be immediately accepted, signed, sealed and delivered just as now the early decision candidates are. Those first choice candidates not chosen immediately would have a

timely snub nudging them to upgrade a previously secondary choice. Nothing is sillier than expecting students to pretend to multiple first choices throughout the protracted period between application deadlines and notification dates - except, perhaps the expensive cultivation of an entire applicant pool when 75% to 90% of its putative membership are either ghosts or super-numeraries.

Instead of hoarding decisions until a belated common notification date, the colleges would (2)immediately report decisions back to the central agency. The central agency would then immediately (3)report to the students. The students would then - as soon as they reasonably could - would (4)notify the central agency of acceptance or declination of the offers. The agency would (5) transmit the results to the colleges.

Why put the central agency in the middle of every interchange? The reason is that the central application office, although a completely neutral transmitter of data and decisions, could provide both students and colleges with very useful information helpful to their respective decisions in "real time."
It is to be stressed that a cardinal principle of this organization would be that colleges are completely free to make their own admissions decisions and students are completely free to respond to the options available to them. The difference

is that both colleges and students could with the help of a central application agency make their respective decisions with a clearer grasp of the real options.

Let us look more closely at how the central office could provide critically important new information at each phase of the process which could assist in more realistic decisions both by colleges and students. The steps are numbered in the text above for reference. Stage (1) is the application originating from the school to the Central Office (CO). This application has the students' colleges choices in rank order. The student may, if he/she wishes, bracket several colleges together to indicate they are of the same level of preference. The highly selective college might at this point simply ask only to have transmissions of data on students for whom it was first choice. Colleges of less selectivity might want to include lower levels of preference. Many, of course, would wish to have data about every student that had included them on his or her selection set.
The colleges might wish to set threshold criteria which would screen out students at this stage who were not qualified.
At stage (2) the colleges have a clear picture of their total applicant pool qualified by degree of interest - a vital piece of information that present procedures obscure. It would also be possible for the central office to do a pool analysis which would help the college adjust its strategies about criteria thresholds, numbers and cultivation program.

At stage (3) the students not accepted at any of their initial preferences could request the CO to send their application to colleges matching their revised criteria who had openings. They could be provided with a list of such colleges - at college request - by the CO.

At stage (4) the CO could supply colleges with rosters of those accepting places (eliminating any multiple place holders) and they could also inform the colleges of updated preferences. By this technique students rejected at their first choices could at this stage realistically revise the preference list to be given mid-season preferential treatment by other colleges.

At stage (5) the colleges could begin to repeat the stages until all students were served and all college places were taken.

Much counseling now involves attempts of students and counselors to evaluate hypothetical options which may or may not exist. The CO system would enable counselors and students to evaluate real options with known probabilities.

Many admissions decisions now have to be made by colleges guessing how likely the offer is to be accepted. This system would allow colleges to be dealing mostly with qualified candidates whose preferences are known.

School teachers and counselors would be relieved of the burden of preparing many forms describing the same student.

Perhaps the greatest effect of this system would be to put initiative for the college selection process back into the hands of the students themselves. This would tend to make more crucial the work of the school counselor.

In consequence the role of competitive hype and high pressure recruitment would be diminished. Colleges having a heavy reliance on such strategies might be forced to find other ways to remain in the market.

There would be nothing mandatory, of course, about a college joining a Central Application Service, just as there is nothing compulsory about joining the College Board or NACAC. You join if you believe you could be served. Schools, I think, would have so much to gain if more of their students than not were applying to colleges using this service, that school counselors would have a tendency to encourage its use. The confident, highly selective colleges, too, I should think, would be well served by such a system. Their participation, of course, would be the enabling factor. Once a reasonable nucleus of selective universities began to be well served by an efficient system, the admissions renaissance which NACAC is working for would be a reality.

Perhaps applying to college can never be as pleasurable as, say, a trip to the beach - but a central application office could surely remove some of its present pain.

The irony of all this is that the gnomes of Princeton and Iowa City must have thought long ago about the practicality of some such development and the impracticality of trying to push it upon an innocent profession that has been so well trained to induce the students to stand so docilely at milking time.

Dan Tyson Santa Fe May 16, 1988